



NEWS RELEASE

from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service

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ADMINISTRATION'S PROPOSED BUDGET INCREASES FUNDING FOR ENDANGERED SPECIES CONSERVATION, REFUGE SYSTEM, RECREATIONAL FISHERIES

President Clinton's proposed \$1.26 billion FY 97 budget for the Interior Department's U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service substantially increases funding for operation of national wildlife refuges, endangered species conservation, and restoration of recreational fisheries.

The President's budget for the Service includes \$659.2 million in appropriated funding, or 9 percent above the FY 96 level passed by a House-Senate conference committee, and \$603.8 million in permanent funding. (In the absence of a budget agreement for FY 96, the Service is being funded at the conference committee level under a series of temporary spending measures.)

"The President's budget reflects the passionate desire of the American people to conserve our fish and wildlife resources for future generations," said Interior Secretary Bruce Babbitt. "It provides a significant boost in funding for both the operation of wildlife refuges and restoration of native sport fisheries, and it restores funding to endangered species programs cut by Congress over the past year.

"Americans will see the difference when they fish, hunt, watch birds, go boating, or just take a walk in the woods--we are making an investment in the richness and diversity of the natural world around us."

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is the principal Federal agency with responsibility for conserving, protecting, and enhancing fish and wildlife and their habitats. The Service manages 508 national wildlife refuges covering 92 million acres, as well as 72 national fish hatcheries.

The agency also enforces Federal wildlife laws, manages migratory bird populations, conserves and restores wildlife habitat such as wetlands, administers the Endangered Species Act, and oversees the Federal Aid program that funnels Federal excise taxes on angling and hunting equipment to state wildlife agencies.

Under the President's budget, funding for refuge operations would increase \$10 million, or 7 percent, to \$158.7 million. The

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budget of the refuge system has been flat in recent years and refuges are among the most poorly funded Federal lands on a per-acre basis.

The Service has designated 1997 as the "Year of the National Wildlife Refuge System" to kick off a multi-year commitment to restore and protect the ecological treasures and recreational resources of a system that receives 28 million visitors a year. These efforts will culminate in 2003, the 100th anniversary of the founding of the system by President Theodore Roosevelt.

"Americans have a long heritage of cherishing wildlife and the refuge system, in all its beauty and diversity, is a reflection of that heritage," Babbitt said. "This additional funding will help reduce a large maintenance backlog, allow for enhancement of wildlife habitat, and improve visitor access and services."

Other highlights of the President's budget include:

- o Funding for endangered species conservation would increase 46 percent to \$83.1 million. This includes \$7.5 million to conclude final listing decisions on 239 species. Action on these species has been prevented since April 1995 by a Congressional moratorium.

The budget also provides a 38-percent increase, to \$5.2 million, for conservation efforts designed to keep candidate species from ever having to be listed as threatened or endangered.

In addition, the Administration is proposing a 50-percent boost in funding, to \$24 million, for consultations under the act to meet the growing demand for habitat conservation plans. These voluntary plans are a way landowners can protect listed species while continuing to develop their property.

Efforts to streamline the private landowner assistance process have been widely successful and the Service anticipates that more than 300 landowners will request HCP assistance in FY 97, taking full advantage of the flexibility built into the existing act.

- o The President's budget also includes a 27-percent increase, to \$46.4 million, for recovery efforts for threatened and endangered species and includes a doubling of funding for the Cooperative Endangered Species Fund to \$16 million, including a \$6-million pilot project of grants to help states acquire land for conservation in areas where private landowners are developing habitat conservation plans.

"Because of the budget cuts we have been forced to take in FY 96, we are going to have to play catch-up if we are going to stem the decline of many species," Babbitt said. "This budget makes it possible for us to get moving again."

- o The President is proposing a new \$4.4-million initiative to conserve and restore native recreational fisheries and habitat. The initiative will focus on restoring sustainable populations of red drum and 21 other fish stocks along the Atlantic and Gulf coasts; lake trout and "coaster" brook trout in the Great Lakes; Atlantic salmon in the Northeast; pallid sturgeon and paddlefish in the Mississippi and Missouri rivers; and greenback cutthroat trout, Gila trout, and Apache trout in the Colorado River basin.

The Service also will augment efforts to research and control whirling disease, which has crippled Montana's fabled Madison River trout fishery and many other prime trout streams in the West.

- o A 74-percent increase, to \$11.8 million, is proposed for the North American Wetlands Conservation Fund. This fund, which Congress cut sharply in FY 96, supports voluntary partnerships to protect and restore millions of acres of wetlands throughout North America. Partners, which include states, corporations, conservation groups, and private landowners, will put up an additional \$22.3 million in matching funds. The Service expects the fund to provide for acquisition, restoration, or enhancement of nearly 188,000 acres of critical wetland habitat for waterfowl and other species in FY 97.